Uncovering Policy Response: Primary School Principals in the Netherlands and the Professions in Education Act.

Abstract

The Netherlands currently has one of the most decentralised education systems in Europe, with a high level of school autonomy and no formal governance levels between the national government and the school. Consequently, school principals have gained more freedom in educational policy, but also face more responsibilities in the provision of schooling. The aim of this study is to discover the ways in which principals in Dutch primary schools respond to governmental policy. The policy focus is the Professions in Education Act (BIO-Act), 2004, which aims to assure the quality of education delivered by school principals, teachers and supporting staff in schools. The research employed a mixed method sequential and phased design approach, collecting and analysing quantitative data (N=103) and augmenting these results with in-depth qualitative data analysis (N=5). The tentative findings from this relatively small study cautiously suggest school principals' (i) possess a sense of responsibility in needing to respond to policy; (ii) mediate policy response in relation to the culture and history of the school and other key stakeholders; (iii) are engaged in a complex process of 'creative social action' (Ball 1998, p. 270).

Keywords: School Principals, Policy Response, Leadership, Competences

Introduction

In the last two decades there has been a growing research focus on school leadership and the role of principals in enhancing the quality of education (Krüger et al. 2007; Levin 1998) and their potential impact on school performance and pupil outcomes (Earley 2013). This increased attention is related to developments in the education field, such as deregulation and decentralisation, which have allowed schools, school boards and local authorities a greater degree of freedom to respond to diverse and local demands. The Netherlands is currently one of the most decentralised education systems in Europe, with a high level of school autonomy and no formal direct governance mechanisms between the national government and the school (Doolaard 2013; Van Twist et al. 2013; OCW 2000). The Dutch national government, nevertheless, through its role in policy formulation, retains overall responsibility for ensuring high quality education (Hofman et al. 2012; Peeter et al. 2013).

It is however the school principals who have to managerially respond and guide schools through the challenges posed by an increasingly complex, highly devolved, policy environment (Geijsel et al. 2007) . Yet while Dutch schools have to respond to, interpret and

balance a constant stream of national policies, there is relatively little knowledge about how this is accomplished in relation to the role of the principal. In attempting to address this shortfall in understanding, the study focuses on one particular Dutch educational policy, the Professions in Education Act (BIO-Act), introduced in the Netherland in 2006 to assure the quality of education delivered by staff in schools. The study seeks to uncover and illuminate the ways in which principals in Dutch primary schools respond to this government policy and to relate the role of the principal to the dimensions of school leadership as developed by Robinson (2007). The central research question is: how do school leaders in primary education in the Netherlands interpret and respond to the Professions in Education Act? The sub questions are: What is the perception of school leaders in needing to respond to the Act? To what extent do school leaders respond to the Act? Is there a difference in perceptions of the school leaders between their ideal situation and their real situation? To what extent do school leaders perceive that they already meet the leadership dimensions as developed by Robinson (2007)?

Policy and policy response

Understandings of policy have moved beyond viewing it as a discrete entity, merely the output of a political system, to understanding policy as a process that brings certain principles or ideas into practice (Ham and Hill 1993). Ranson (1995, p. 440) highlights the purpose of policy for governments to 'codify and publicise the values which are to inform future practice and thus encapsulate prescriptions for reform'. This viewpoint is in keeping with Olssen (2004, p. 72) when he states 'Policy here is taken to be any course of action [....] relating to the selection of goals, the definition of values or the allocation of resources'. A connection is thus made between policy and governance, and more specifically understanding policy in relationship to 'the exercise of political power and the language [discourse] that is used to legitimate that process' (Olssen 2004, p. 72). As Ball (1998, p.124) contends, 'policies are [....] ways of representing, accounting for and legitimating political decisions'. Moreover, because of their nature they go to the heart of the relationship between the state and the welfare of its citizens (Hill 1996). Thus the concept of policy is entangled with notions of public and social issues, the solutions to these, and the role of the state in providing these solutions (Bagley and Ward 2013). Increasingly, within neo-liberal policy informed states such as the Netherlands, responsibility for the delivery of services is delegated whereby the state no longer directly intervenes in dictating what and how institutions must operate; rather it facilitates a process of indirect governance whereby the actions of institutions are

determined by performance (Ball 2008). Jessop's (2002, p. 199) uses the term 'destatization' to argue that neoliberalism has created a "de-stated" model of governance in which individuals (such as school principals) are given direct responsibility for initiating a policy response for ensuring the delivery of services.

We would contend that while it is important to acknowledge the discursive dominance and impact of neoliberalism on a national and global level, it is equally important to appreciate that the matching of policy rhetoric with response and practice is never straightforward. Policy response might be described as highly contextualised, complex and fragmented. In essence, there are no universal 'truths' about policy implementation, the journey from principle to practice - even if discursively framed in a particular way - is a contested one which involves institutions and individuals in a process of 'creative social action' (Ball 1998, p. 270). This is a crucial point, as contestation provides a political space in which dominant policy discourses are not simply accepted un-problematically at face value, but may be challenged, nuanced, reformulated, and changed (Bagley and Ward 2013). For this reason, Braun et al (2010, p. 549) talk not of policy response but 'policy enactment', which they claim 'involves creative processes of interpretation and recontextualisation – that is, the translation through reading, writing and talking of text into action and the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualised practices'. At a school-based level this enactment process reveals the ways in which policy is never simply implemented but 'interpreted' and 'translated' in a context of time, space, and place. The premise underpinning this is that 'policies do not normally tell you what to do, they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or outcomes are set' (Ball 1994, p.19). Such a standpoint on policy enactment is significant as it positions principals, teachers, governors, parents, and others engaged with educational reform as 'key actors, rather than merely as subjects in the policy process' (Braun et al. 2010, p. 549). The implementation of policies is framed by the culture and history of each school, and by the positioning and personalities of the key actors involved (Spillane et al. 2002; Braun, Maguire & Ball 2010).

Leadership dimensions

Increasingly, there is a growing global interest in school leadership and belief that the role of the school principal has a significant impact - alongside teachers - on school performance and pupil outcomes (Earley, 2013).

At the core of most definitions, principals are those who provide direction and exert influence in order to achieve the school's goals, directly or indirectly, guiding schools through the challenges posed by an increasingly complex policy environment (Geijsel et al. 2007). According to Robinson (2007) there are five dimensions (table 1) important for effective school leadership. These five dimensions are derived from a meta-analysis of 11 studies which measured the relationship between types of leadership and student outcomes.

Leadership dimension	**Definition of dimension**
1. Establishing goals and expectations	Setting, communicating and monitoring of learning goals, standards and expectations and the involvement of staff in processes so that there is clarity and consensus about goals.
2. Strategic resourcing	Aligning resource selection and allocation to priority teaching goals. Includes provision of appropriate expertise through staff recruitment.
3. Planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and curriculum	Involvement in the support and evaluation of teaching through classroom visits and the provision of feedback. Oversight through school-wide coordination across classes and alignment to school goals.
4. Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development	Leadership that participates with teachers in professional learning.
5. Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment	Protecting the time for learning and teaching and establishing an orderly and supportive environment in the school.

Table 1 *Leadership dimensions of Robinson (2007)*

Robinson (2007) concludes that the closer leaders are to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to make a difference to students and thus increasing the quality of education.

Stakeholders in Dutch educational policy

Governmental decisions are reached after extensive interaction with other stakeholders in the educational field, who are also involved in the implementation (Van Twist et al. 2013). The government, local authorities and school boards/principals are the three leading actors in the delivery of educational quality and policy (Peeters, Hofman and Frissen 2013). Table 2 represents the diverse actors and their roles. Given the multilevel governance structure in the educational system, the division of responsibilities is a continuous matter of debate. Tension exists between steering and control on outcomes by the national government on the one hand and the autonomous schools on the other (Van Twist et al. 2013).

Stakeholder	**Role**	**Tasks**
Macro level		
Minister of Education	Responsible for the overall quality of education	Development of national policy frameworks; development of

		quality norms; financing
Inspectorate of Education	Supervision of education quality	Assess schools using a set of fixed indicators; inform and advise schools
Primary Education Council	Representation of primary education school boards	Assist schools to improve performance; developing and implementing governmental policies
Meso level		
Local Government	Owner of school buildings and responsible for their maintenance	Housing; maintaining coordination with other policies
Micro level		
School board	Formal management of the school(s)	Human resources; set the organisational structure; quality monitoring; policy and management
Principal	Responsible for the quality of education in the classroom and for the teachers/staff in school	Steer educational quality, policy and management; look after teachers/staff; contact with parents and children
Teacher	Expert in the classroom	Teaching; contact with parents; development of the curriculum

Table 2: Main Actors in educational policy and their roles (Van Twist et al. 2013; Peeters et al. 2013)

At the macro level, both the Ministry of Education and the Inspectorate of Education are in their own ways responsible for the quality of education. The Ministry of Education can have a large impact on schools by setting out clear rules and performance indicators, and has several policy levers at their discretion namely: legal, financial and communicative (Doolaard 2013; Bronneman-Helmers 2011). A particularly powerful lever is the funding of schools, and the extension of financial or other supportive sources (Van Twist et al. 2013). As Wallace (1991) observed, the form and extent of enactment will depend on whether a policy is mandated, strongly recommended or merely suggested. The role of the Inspectorate relates to the supervision of educational quality related to performance indicators which may be subsequently used to inform and provide advice to schools (Hofman et al. 2012; Peeters et al. 2013).

At meso level there is the local government, concerned primarily with building infrastructure and policy co-ordination, while at micro level there are a diverse range of actors. School boards manage one or more schools and are formally responsible for the quality of education in their school(s). The influence of principals largely depends on the autonomy they receive from the school board and it would appear that under the Dutch system principals have a great degree of autonomy (Van Twist et al. 2013). School boards see the principal primarily as an educational leader, while principals see themselves more as coordinator, coach or guide (Hofman et al. 2012). Principals manage daily school practice and are responsible for the quality of education and the work atmosphere as well as policy implementation (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins 2008; Leithwood and Riehl 2003; Mulford 2003; Spillane et al. 2002; Van Twist et al. 2013). An important element of their role is the ability to spot potential in staff and to help steer teachers in a direction that would expand their abilities, to this end school principals' play a key role in promoting professional training (Geijsel et al. 2009).

Professions in Education Act (BIO-Act) 2004

The Dutch government's constitutional responsibility to provide high quality education and a political perception that this was not being sufficiently achieved and required improved educational – especially teacher – competences, led in 2004 to the passing of the 'Professions in Education Act' (operationalized in 2006) (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2009). The essence of the act (referred to as 'BIO-Act') is that all educational staff including teachers, teaching assistants, and principals - must not only be qualified, but also possess the same basic competences. Although there are set standards for teachers, principals and assistants, only the competence requirements for teachers are currently established by law (Leussink and Timmermans 2005).

> The framework of competence requirements specifies four professional roles that teachers have (i) interpersonal role, (ii) pedagogical role, (iii) organizational role and (iv) the role of an expert in subject matter and teaching methods. The teacher fulfils these professional roles in four different types of situations, which are characteristic of a teacher's profession: (a) working with students, (b) colleagues, (c) the school's working environment, and (d) with him-/herself. The latter refers to his/her own personal development. The framework specifies competence requirements for each role and in each situation.

(European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2009).

Significantly, and in keeping with the devolved system of governance in the Netherlands, while preconditions are set by the national government, it is schools which are primarily responsible for providing high quality education (Leussink and Timmermans 2005; OCW 2000). Three key factors have been developed to achieve the objectives of this Act, namely 1) the introduction of competence requirements that set minimum standards for teachers, assistants and principals; 2) an obligation on principals to enable their staff to maintain a level of competence and 3) the keeping of competence records whereby teachers describe in a structured manner the competence requirements and how they maintain these (Leussink and Timmermans 2005; OCW 2010).

Methodology

In this study, the focus is on the response of principals towards the Act on Professions in Education and how this relates to the leadership dimensions of Robinson (2007). A mixed method sequential and phased explanatory design is used (Creswell and Clark 2011). The choice of a mixed method approach is to enable the quantitative and qualitative methods to complement each other in order to provide a more complete view of the subject. Whilst the quantitative data and subsequent analysis of these data provide a general understanding of the research problem, the qualitative data and their analyses refine and explain the statistical results by exploring participants' views in more depth (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). The following table gives an overview of the design of the study.

Phase	**Procedure**	**Product**
Quantitative data collection	Survey via email to principals (N=103)	Numeric data
Case selection	Selecting participants (N=5) Developing interview questions	Cases
Qualitative data collection	Individual in-depth telephone interviews	Transcripts of data
Quantitative data analysis	Data screening	Descriptive statistics, t-tests, effect sizes
Qualitative data analysis	Coding and thematic analysis	Codes and themes
Integration of the quantitative and qualitative results	Interpretation and explanation of the quantitative and qualitative results	Discussion Implications

Table 3: Overview of design

Participants

The target population is Dutch primary school principals. For the sample a database of the University of Groningen, which contains the addresses of 6713 primary schools, was used. A computer randomly selected 1002 schools and the principals in these schools each received an e-questionnaire. The response rate was 10.2% (N=103); a disappointingly low response which means that the findings – while statistically valid - need to be treated with caution in terms of drawing any firm conclusions At the end of the survey, principals were asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview in order to expand upon the comments and . five principals were interviewed in-depth. The anonymity of the participants in the second phase of the study is protected by assigning codenames, thus keeping all responses confidential.

Quantitative phase

Instrument and data collection

For the first, quantitative phase, a self-developed instrument is used based on the instrument used in research of the European Policy Network of School Leadership (EPNoSL) on head teachers and competences in Scotland (GTC Scotland 2013), modified to fit the Dutch situation. BIO-Act In the survey, principals were asked about their experiences with BIO-Act and the leadership dimensions taken from Robinson (2007). The survey is measured by a Likert scale and open-ended questions.

To answer the research questions, the data is analysed in several ways. The reliability of the scales is measured by Cronbach's α (table 3). All scales have an acceptable ($0.6 \leq \alpha < 0.7$) to good ($0.7 \leq \alpha < 0.9$) internal consistency.

Scale (items in survey)	**Number of questions**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Reliability (Cronbach's α)**
Current situation (1a-1g)	7	3.84	.47	.73
• Implementation in schools (1c-1g)	5	3.68	.56	.70
• Principals and their knowledge about the Act (1a-1b)	2	4.23	.52	.83

• Principals and the use of the Act in schools (1c, 1e-1g)	4	3.86	.61	.67
Ideal outcome (2a-2g)	7	4.06	.50	.80
• Implementation in schools (2b, 2d-2g)	5	4.06	.50	.69
• Principals and their knowledge about the Act (2a, 2b)	2	4.04	.58	.84
• Principals and the use of the Act in schools (2b, 2e-2g)	4	4.18	.56	.75
Acknowledgement of leadership dimensions (Robinson) (3a-3e)	5	4.37	.42	.76
Use of leadership dimensions (Robinson) in schools (4a-4e)	5	3.93	.41	.64

Table 4: Means, standard deviations (SD) and reliability of scales

Data analysis

To answer the research question different tests are used. First, the perception of and the response to BIO-Act are calculated using the frequencies of variables *Current situation* and its sub variables (see table 4). Also, a comparison is made between the current situation and the ideal outcome, using a paired t-test. To answer the questions involving the leadership dimensions, a general overview of the data of the acknowledgement of leadership dimensions and the use in schools is given by a description of the frequencies of variables *Acknowledgement* and *Dimensions in schools.* By using a paired t-test, a comparison is made to see whether there is a difference between these variables. Finally, to explore the effectiveness of the implementation and the use of the Act, a comparison is made between the degree of implementation and use of the Act and the use of the leadership dimensions, using Pearson correlation coefficients.

To be able to not only see whether there is a difference between groups, but also the size of the difference(s), the effect sizes (ES) are measured by Cohen's *d.* Effect sizes allow measuring the magnitude of mean differences. It is the ratio of the difference between two means divided by the standard deviation. This is calculated after rejecting the hypothesis in a test (Cohen 1992). As Cohen's *d* usually is for independent groups, one must correct for dependence among means in order to make direct comparisons from between-subjects studies. This correction is made using the correlation between the two means (Morris and DeShon 2002, equation 8, p.109).

Qualitative phase

In the second, qualitative phase, interviews with selected respondents of the survey were conducted. In-depth semi-structured telephone interviews (N=5) explore the answers to the survey in greater depth, addressing in what ways principals qualitatively respond to BIO-Act. The content of the interview protocol is grounded in the quantitative results from the first phase of the study and consists of three parts: 1) general part, 2) BIO-Act and 3) leadership dimensions. The gender, work experiences and the function of the participants are shown in table 5 and each quote states who said it using the formula: [number of participant, (m/f), school].

Participant	**Total experience (years)**	**Experience in current school (years)**	**Foundation**
#1 (male)	11-15	11-15	Principal of 1 school in foundation of 5 schools
#2 (female)	0-5	0-5	Deputy director, one school
#3 (female)	0-5	0-5	Principal of 1 school in foundation of 3 schools
#4 (male)	11-15	11-15	Principal of two schools
#5 (male)	5-10	0-5	Principal of 1 school in foundation of 19 schools

Table 5: Participants, their experience and school(s)

For the qualitative data analysis, a program for this purpose, Atlas.ti, is used. Each interview of approximately 45 minutes is audio taped and transcribed verbatim. After the transcription, several stages are then completed: 1) preliminary exploration of the data by reading through the transcripts; 2) coding the data by segmenting and labelling the text; 3) developing families by aggregating similar codes together; 4) connecting and interrelating families; 5) cross-case thematic analyses.

Results

Policy response of BIO-Act

Nearly all school principals (96%) indicate that they know of the BIO-Act (M=4.23, table 6) and most of them are aware of the content (86%). Principals, however, are hardly satisfied about their degree of involvement in formulating the Act. This item on the survey scored a mean of 2.99.

Scale	Number of questions	Mean	SD
Current situation (1a-1g)	7	3.84	.47
• Involvement BIO-Act	1	2.99	.69
• Implementation in schools (1c-1g)	5	3.68	.56
• Principals and their knowledge about the Act (1a-1b)	2	4.23	.52
• Principals and the use of the Act in schools (1c, 1e-1g)	4	3.86	.61
Ideal outcome (2a-2g)	7	4.06	.50
• Implementation in schools (2b, 2d-2g)	5	4.06	.50
• Principals and their knowledge about the Act (2a, 2b)	2	4.04	.58
• Principals and the use of the Act in schools (2b, 2e-2g)	4	4.18	.56
Acknowledgement of leadership dimensions (Robinson) (3a-3e)	5	4.37	.42
Use of leadership dimensions (Robinson) in schools (4a-4e)	5	3.93	.41

Table 6: Descriptive statistics of variables

As school principals noted in the interviews, they are involved in policy-making indirectly via the PO (primary education)-council or other foundations. That implies that the degree of perceived involvement depends on how active the principal is himself. As one of principals argues:

> By developing policy, there could be more attention on asking principals directly, instead of via the council or the policy makers. They have other interests than the people who work in the schools. But it also depends on the principal, how much time he wants to spend with these issues. Some principals rather are focused on their own school instead of the higher levels. [Participant 1 (m), principal of 1 school in foundation of 5 schools]

As for nearly all principals this means that they have no direct voice in the formulation of the policy, they generally perceive the BIO-Act as a law that hardly takes into account their own concerns. In spite of this, principals are positive about the content of the Act. About 84% of the principals value the use of the competences in performance reviews, while 75% attach

importance to the use of competence records in the Act, and to sufficient possibilities for professional training. The merits of the Act are its focus on professionalization and the fact that it sets a framework wherein schools are able to adapt the requirements to their own policy rather than provide a strict set of rules. The Act determines *what* and not *how* schools can professionalise. However, the functioning of the Act varies among principals. On the one hand, some principals express that they use the content of the Act to improve the quality of the teachers by using the competences and the competence records. As one of them explains:

> BIO-Act has a strong aim, as it is based on professionalization and the quality of teachers. The teacher is the basis/foundation of the quality of education. As principal you try to motivate and stimulate the teacher to increase their quality. If the teachers are having qualitative good competence records and they have their 166 hours of professional training, then this works out positively for the quality of the school. [Participant 4 (m), principal of two schools]

Some other principals argue that improving the quality of the teachers is an ongoing process and that BIO-Act does not bring much difference to what is already happening:

> BIO-Act has not added much value for me. Just like you want the students to get good results, this is the same for the teachers. You want to provide a safe basis so you can learn from each other and get the most out of the learning process. I don't need BIO-Act for that, it should be natural. [Participant 3 (f), principal of 1 school in foundation of 3 schools]

Despite these different attitudes towards the BIO-Act, the added value of the Act is the transparency of the profession and the possibilities of how teachers can develop themselves. All principals affirm that the Act provides insight into how accurate and up to date the teacher's work is, using the competence record. Remaining competent is important for the principals as well as the teachers and BIO-Act provides for some of the principals the additional push to improve this in their schools. In order to give the profession status and to ensure that the quality of education remains high, it is necessary to pay attention to professional training. The Act provides opportunities for the professionalization of the teacher; teachers can decide what they want to improve and how they go about it. Principals agreed on the importance of professional training for teachers and remaining competent. Although principals are very decisive on the necessity of teachers keeping up their

competences, a few acknowledge that it sometimes is hard to find enough time for professional training. Although these constraints may hamper professionalization in practice, several principals note, the Act offers opportunities and stimulates activities for enhancing teachers' professional development, but whether this is achieved remains largely dependent on the internal motivation of teachers. According to these principals, teachers nevertheless are willing to engage in professionalization activities if they know it will benefit the students.

To explore whether principals have implemented and used the Act as they ideally would, paired t-tests are run. There are no outliers in the data assessed by inspection of a boxplot. Both variables were normally distributed. The results (see table 7) indicate that principals on average have implemented the Act less than the might have preferred (mean difference=-.39). With regard to the use of the Act in their school, principals on average also indicate that they would like to use elements of the Act more than they do in practice (mean difference=-.32). Cohen's d for both scales reveal that this concerns moderate effects. This means that in the ideal situation the participants would have been better informed and would have implemented and used BIO-Act to a greater extent than in the current situation.

Scale	**M-difference**	**SD**	**95% CI**	**T (102)**	**P-value**	**r**	**Cohen's d**
Implementation	-.39	.51	[-.48; -.29]	-7.73	P<.001	.55	.74 (moderate effect)
Use of Act	-.32	.52	[-.43; -.22]	-6.27	P<.001	.60	.62 (moderate effect)

Table 7: Comparison between current and ideal situation using a paired t-test

The interviews with principals substantiate that the implementation process of BIO-Act could have been better and also differs between schools. Although the idea of competence records to keep up the developments in training is acknowledged, not all schools use them as prescribed. A reason for this is that policies set by the government can often be implemented with some creativity as policy has to be adapted to the school environment. Schools take into account the nature of the policy, what is needed for its implementation, and what is already done in the school. This suggests, as interviewees report, that the school board or principal transforms the policy into what they think is right or useful. By doing this, schools may not act completely in accordance to the original aim of the Act and its outcome. Three out of five interviewed principals are even very critical of the implementation of the Act in their school. While in the survey the implementation and use is scored positively, this appears to be more the theoretical

description of the implementation. In the interviews the practical side of the implementation and use is explained. One principal states that in the beginning they were enthusiastic about the Act but its execution fell short of expectations. Reasons for the failing implementation mentioned by the other two principals are the combination with other (policy) documents, solidarity in the school, and interpretation of the policy. As one of them explains:

> I had hoped that it would be a part of professional pride to keep up a portfolio with the maintenance of the developments of the teachers. Because of BIO-Act, you could show through the records where you are from and what your ambitions are. Within our school this failed and now we are already working on other projects and policies so I do not think this will be better in the future, which is a pity as the aim of the Act is good. [Participant 2 (f), deputy director, one school]

As the competence records are implemented with large discretion for teachers and schools, there are still many teachers who do not work with the records. To make sure that the Act is implemented equally in all schools, this principal argues that it would be better to have a clear control or evaluation mechanism. The task of the Inspectorate is to supervise the school plan and the functioning of the school. One of the principals is critical about the functioning of the Inspectorate with regard to the BIO-Act and says that the control is poor.

In summary, the idea of BIO-Act is of positive influence on the profession of teachers and the quality of education, though the degree of use of the Act differs. The implementation of the Act was confusing with regard to the use of competence records and overall control is lacking. The participants all knew the competence requirements and use them in the appraisals but the use of competence records is not common. The Inspectorate should control the use of competence records but in reality often fails to do so. For this reason, not all the participants do use them in the way that was expected by the implementation of the Act.

School leadership

Based on the survey data almost all principals agree that establishing goals and expectations; strategic resourcing; planning, coordinating and evaluating; stimulating teacher learning and development; and ensuring an orderly and supportive environment are important features of educational leadership (*M*=4.37, SD=.42). The agreement on each of these features ranges from 92 % and 97 % (see table 8).

Dimensions of Robinson	**Acknowledgement**	**Use by principals**

	(%)	(%)
Establishing goals and expectations	94	66
Strategic resourcing	95	61
Planning, coordinating and evaluating	92	68
Teacher learning and development	97	94
Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment	96	94

Table 8: Acknowledgement and use of leadership dimensions by principals

A paired t-test (N=93) was run to identify whether the *acknowledgement* of the five leadership dimensions (M=4.37, SD=.42) differs from the reported *use* of these dimensions in practice(M=3.93, SD=.41).This analysis revealed a difference between the use and implementation overall (M=0.43, t(92)=9.68, p<.001) as well for each of the separate dimensions (see table 9).The hypothesis that the acknowledgement of the leadership dimensions and the use in the schools would be equal is not supported by the results of the study. So, the participants do acknowledge the dimensions but do not apply them in their school to such a degree. Notable is the p-value of *teacher learning and development* (p=.04). Although significant at p<.05, the *teacher learning and development* dimension is not significant, unlike the other dimensions, at p<.01. An explanation for this can be found in the qualitative results. The principals indicate that they more often pay attention to stimulating and facilitating professional learning and development in their schools.

Scale	**M**	**SD**	**95% CI**	**T (102)**	**P-value**
Leadership dimensions	*.44*	*.43*	*[.35;.53]*	*9.83*	*p<.001*
Establishing goals and expectations	.55	.73	[.40;.69]	7.41	p<.001
Strategic resourcing	.75	.79	[.59;.90]	9.33	p<.001
Planning, coordinating and evaluating	.52	.73	[.38;.67]	7.11	p<.001
Teacher learning and development	.11	.54	[.005;.22]	2.08	p=.04
Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment	.24	.65	[.11;.37]	3.7	p<.001

Table 2: Comparison leadership dimensions on the acknowledgement and the use in schools using a paired t-test

The qualitative data reveal that principals all expressed a clear vision on leadership, whereby empathy, openness, responsibility and clear communication are the main concepts. They focus on the coaching of teachers and staff and being responsible for the school, as well as having clear long-term vision and an effective school plan. All participants cite the importance of professional training, not only for the teachers but also for themselves. A lifelong learning and effort to improve every year is important. The participants do notice the change in tasks. The paperwork has grown, and for the principals who are part of a foundation

there are sometimes difficulties with their own responsibilities, roles or conflicts with the school board:

> Communication is very important; it is balancing between open and closed communication, democratic and undemocratic decisions and being transparent and less transparent; that is where you have to move between as a leader, every day again. [Participant 2 (f), deputy director, one school]

> As principal you are the one that is responsible and have to make decisions. But you have to do this by looking at the staff as people and not as workers. Besides that, you have ambition with the school and it is your task to guide the school and the staff and communicate clearly. [Participant 5 (m), principal of 1 school in foundation of 19 schools]

The final part of the analysis is whether there is a correlation between the implementation (M=3.68, SD=.56) and use of the Act (M=3.86, SD=.61) and the acknowledgement (M=4.37, SD=.42) and use of the leadership dimensions in the schools (M=3.93, SD=.41). Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients are computed to assess the relationships between these variables, showing a positive correlation between the variables (see table 10). Increases in the acknowledgement and use of the leadership dimensions are correlated with increases in the implementation and use of Act BIO. Thus, principals who have implemented Act BIO to a higher extent do also acknowledge the dimensions to a higher extent and differ in the use of them in their own schools.

Leadership dimensions of Robinson	**Implementation of Act BIO**	**Use of Act BIO**
Acknowledgement of dimensions	*r=.32, N=100, p=.001**	*r=.23, N=96, p=.024**
Establishing goals and expectations	r=.19, N=102, p=.053	r=.18, N=102, p=.073
Strategic resourcing	r=.16, N=101, p=.11	r=.15, N=101, p=.14
Planning, coordinating and evaluating	r=.21, N=102, p=.033*	r=.21, N=102, p=.035*
Teacher learning and development	r=.40, N=101, p<.001*	r=.38, N=101, p<.001*
Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment	r=.20, N=101, p=.050	r=.20, N=101, p=.047*
Use of dimensions in schools	*r=.31, N=100, p=.002**	*r=.23, N=96, p=.022**
Establishing goals and expectations	r=.030, N=100, p=.77	r=.001, N=100, p=.79

Strategic resourcing	r=.12, N=100, p=.25	r=.12, N=100, p=.23
Planning, coordinating and evaluating	r=.17, N=101, p=.081	r=.17, N=101, p=.08
Teacher learning and development	r=.35, N=98, p<.001*	r=.37, N=98, p<.001*
Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment	r=.026, N=101, p=.79	r=.043, N=101, p=.67

*= significant correlations between variables

Table: 3 *Correlation between the implementation and use of Act BIO and the leadership dimensions*

By comparing the dimensions with the implementation and use of Act BIO the results show that the acknowledgement of the dimensions of *planning, coordination and evaluating* and *teacher learning and development* have a significant positive correlation with the implementation and the use of the Act, even though the correlation is low. The correlation for *teacher learning and development* is the largest. The importance of professional training is correlated with increases of the acknowledgement and use of Act BIO. These are the same results as found in the previous paragraph comparing the acknowledgement and use of the Act. Thus, the degree of professional training is an important factor for the implementation and use of Act BIO by principals. Leadership means for the principals making the most out of every situation and remaining competent. In summary, the leadership dimensions of Robinson are acknowledged by the principals and the principals all have their own definitions of leadership using the same main concepts. The acknowledgement and the use of the dimensions correlate positively to the implementation and the use of Act BIO. Though, professional training is the only dimension which has a significant positive correlation with both the use and implementation of Act BIO.

Concluding discussion

The aim of this study was to discover the ways in which principals in Dutch primary schools respond to governmental policy through focusing on one particular educational policy, the Act on Professions in Education, using a mixed method sequential and phased design. This study has a small response rate which suggests that the findings need to be interpreted tentatively and very cautiously, although the answers are consistent among the participants.

Principals' involvement in developing policies often depends on how active the principals are themselves. Doolaard (2013), Van Twist et al. (2013) and Hofman (2012) emphasise the increased degree of autonomy in schools. According to this research, the range of responsibility can differ between schools and depends on the school board and/or the foundation if the school is part of one. This study has shown, similar to earlier findings of Ball

(1994) and Lingard and Ozga (2007) that policies set by the government can often be implemented with some creativity as policy has to be adapted to the school environment. To make the policy response and enactment as smooth as possible, issues that are brought into school should be coherent and need to correlate with the pre-existing rules and policies. The principals' acknowledge that the combination of diverse policies can be difficult taking into account the continuity and the work pressure in schools. The consequence of this is that the implementation of BIO-Act in schools was diverse and that not all schools have implemented BIO-Act as prescribed. By comparing the current situation of the implementation and the ideal outcome, it can be concluded that the implementation of BIO-Act in general fell short, which is in line with the finding of Ecorys (2011) that intrinsic motivation from the profession itself is needed to make a policy like this successful. Also, the degree of involvement of principals in the development of the Act could have been better.

The highlights of BIO-Act are the focus on professionalization and that it is seen as a framework wherein the schools are able to adapt the requirements to their own policy. Principals have implemented or tried to implement BIO-Act, but in some schools it failed because of a lack in the prescription of the Act, implementation time or attention. Besides the critical aspects, the competence requirements and the competence records are well known by all the participants; however the extent of the use of the competence records differ between the schools and not all schools use and/or will use them as prescribed. The Inspectorate should control the use of competence records but in reality often fails to do so. So there are mixed feelings about the implementation of the Act, but the participants name professional training as significant in maintaining the quality of education. For schools that already note the professional development of the personnel and in which there are enough possibilities for professional training, BIO-Act has little value. It is merely an incentive for those schools who failed to archive the professional developments and which lack in the promotion of professional training. Overall, it can be concluded that principals are positive about BIO-Act and support its implementation and use, but from a practical perspective there is a more diverse view. For example, central government communication was found to be an important factor in the response by school principals to the Act, with respondents indicating a desire for information to be clearer.

The relevance of the leadership dimensions (as specified by Robinson, 2007) is supported by the findings. These findings suggest that in general the participants acknowledge the dimensions but do not apply them in their school to the same degree. The dimensions are seen

more as concepts whereby principals can develop their own vision. According to the qualitative data, the principals have their own visions on leadership, which are in line with the leadership dimensions of Robinson. The results of this study indicate that the dimension of professional training is of main importance in the implementation and use of Act BIO. The principals, who manage to have a high level of professional training in their schools, implement and use Act BIO to a greater extent. A footnote is that the leadership dimensions of Robinson are well-known and this study confirms the dimensions but does not critically analyse the existence and/or entirety of the dimensions.

Taken together, the data suggest that a 'de-stated' (Jessop 2002) model of governance is operating within the Netherlands with school principals possessing a sense of responsibility in needing to respond to the Act. Equally, however, the policy is neither accepted unproblematicaly nor implemented straightforwardly (Braun et al. 2010), but facilitates a mediated response encompassing the culture and history of the school as well as relationships between key actors, including the government, local authorities, and councils and between and within schools. School principals, teachers and other stakeholders are thus found to be positioned not 'merely as subjects in the policy process' (Braun et al. 2010 p. 549) but situated as significant actors in a complex policy process. In effect, in responding to the Act the data signal the ways in which principals are engaged in a process of 'creative social action' (Ball 1998, p. 270).

References

Bagley, C. and Ward, S. (2013). Policy Response: A Critical Engagement. Retrieved from http://www.schoolleadership.eu/sites/default/files/policy-response-a-critical-engagement-2013.pdf (Accessed on 8. 8. 2014).

Ball, S. J. (1994). *Education reform: a critical and post structural approach.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Ball, S. J. (2008). *The education debate.* Bristol: Policy press.

Braun, A., Maguire, M. and Ball, S. J. (2010). Policy Enactment in the UK Secondary School: Examining Policy, Practice and School Positioning. *Journal of Education Policy,* 25, issue 4, pp. 547-560.

Bronneman-Helmers, R. (2011). *Overheid en onderwijsbestel. Beleidsvorming rond het Nederlandse onderwijs bestel (1990-2010).* Den Haag: SCP.

Cohen, J. (1992). A power primer *Psychological Bulletin*, 112, issue 1, pp. 155-159.

Creswell, J.W. and Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research.* London: SAGE.

Doolaard, S. (2013). *Het streven naar kwaliteit in scholen voor primair onderwijs.* Groningen: Gronings Instituut voor Onderzoek van het Onderwijs (GION).

Ecorys P (2011). *Evaluatie Wet op Beroepen in Onderwijs. Eindrapport.* Amsterdam: Ecorys Nederland BV.

Earley, P. (2013). *Exploring the School Leadership Landscape: Changing demands, changing realities.* London: Bloomsbury.

Geijsel, F.P., Sleegers, P. J. C., Stoel, R. N. and Krüger, M. L. (2009). The effect of teacher psychological and school organizational and leadership factors on teachers' professional learning in Dutch schools. *The Elementary School Journal, 109,* issue 4, pp.406-427.

Geijsel, F. P., Meijers, F. and Wardekker, W. (2007). Leading the process of reculturing: roles and actions of principals. *The Australian Educational Researcher,* 34, issue 3, pp. 135-161.

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2009). Retrieved from http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/netherlands/national-overview/teachertraining-basic-and-specialist-teacher-training (Accessed on 08.08.2014).

Hammersley-Fletcher, L. and Brundrett, M. (2005). Leaders on leadership: the impressions of primary school head teachers and subject leaders. *School leadership & management: formerly school organisation,* 25, issue 1, pp. 59-75.

Hofman, R. H., Van Leer, K., De Boom, J. and Hofman, W. H. A. (2012). *Programma Beleidsgericht Onderzoek Primair Onderwijs (BOPO) Educational Governance: Strategie, ontwikkeling en effecten. Eindrapport.* Groningen, Rotterdam: Gronings Instituut voor Onderzoek van het Onderwijs (GION).

Krüger, M. L., Witziers, B. and Sleegers, P. (2007). The impact of school leadership on School level factors: validation of a causal model. *Policy and Practice,* 18, issue 1, pp. 1-20.

Leithwood, K. A. and Riehl, C. (2003). What we know about successful leadership. National College for School leadership (NCSL). Retrieved from http://www.csuphd.pbworks.com/w/404/what_we_know_about_school_leadership.pdf (Accessed on 8. 8. 2014).

Leithwood, K., Harris, A. and Hopkins, D. (2008). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership. *School Leadership and Management,* 28, issue 1, pp. 27-42.

Leussink, A. R. A. and Timmermans, J. (2005). Wet op beroepen in het onderwijs. Alpheaan de Rijn: Kluwer.

Levin, B. (1998). An epidemic of education policy: (What) can we learn from each other? *Comparative Education,* 34, issue 2, pp. 131-141.

Lingard, B. and Ozga, J. (2007).Reading education policy and politics. *The Routledge-Falmer reader in education policy and politics.* London: Routledge.

Morris, S.B. and DeShon, R. P. (2002). Combining effect size estimates in meta-analysis with repeated measures and independent-group designs. *Psychological Methods,* 7, pp. 105-125.

Mulford, B. (2003). School Leaders: changing roles and impact on teacher and school effectiveness. OECD. Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/37133393.pdf (Accessed on 8. 8. 2014).

NSA (2012). *Advies beroepsstandaard schoolleiders Primair Onderwijs.* Utrecht: NSA.

OCW (2000). Onderwijsbeleidsbrief Onderwijs in stelling. Retrieved from http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/bestanden/documenten-en/publicaties/kamerstukken/2005/10/14/uitgangspunten-wet-op-de-beroepen-in-hetonderwijs/download-doc-brtkwetbio.pdf (Accessed on 8. 8. 2014)

Onderwijsraad (2007). *Leraarschap is eigenaarschap*. Den Haag: Auteur.

Peeters, R., Hofman, R. H. and Frissen, P. H. A. (2013). *Het ongemak van autonomie. Onderwijsbeleid tussen vrijheid en verantwoording.* Den Haag, Groningen: Gronings Instituut voor Onderzoek van het Onderwijs (GION).

Robinson, V. M. J. (2007). *School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why*. Winmalee, NSW: Australian Council for Educational Leaders

Rutte, M. and Samsom, D. (2012). *Bruggen slaan, regeerakkoord VVD – PvdA* Rijksoverheid. Retrieved from http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten-en-publicaties/rapporten/2012/10/29/regeerakkoord.html (Accessed on 8. 8. 2014).

Spillane, J. P., Diamon, J. B., Burch, P., Hallet, T., Jita, L. and Zoltners, J. (2002). Managing in the Middle: School Leaders and the Enactment of Accountability. *Educational Policy*, 16, issue 5, pp. 731-762.

Van Twist, M., Van der Steen, M., Kleiboer, M., Scherpenisse, J. and Theisens, H. (2013). Coping with very weak primary schools: towards smart interventions in Dutch education policy. A Governing Complex Education Systems Case Study, OECD.

Wallace, M. (1991). Coping with multiple innovations in schools: an exploratory study. *School organization*, 11, issue 2, pp. 187-209.